

*Bodhi Leaf Publication No. 84*

**Insight Meditation  
in the Forest**  
**An Interview**

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*Ron Ohayv*



**BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY**

# **Insight Meditation in the Forest**

## **An Interview**

By

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# Insight Meditation in the Forest

## Introduction

**T**his interview takes place in June 1973 at a spread-out, hilly monastery called Wat Pa Bung Kow-Luang in the forest near the Cambodian border. The place has a deep, quiet echo—sometimes interrupted by American war planes on their way to bomb Cambodia. It is one of the serious meditation monasteries in north-east Thailand, the section most associated with intense meditation. It is led by Ajahn Jan, a strong disciple of Ajahn Chah, the famous teacher of continuous “mindfulness.” In this interview with Ajahn Jan (J), as a teacher he is solid, and knows what he is doing. He clearly explains how the monk’s discipline (the Vinaya and monastery (Wat) rules and daily activities) is progressively used in his centre for self-control, as a start for concentration, for training the personality, and as a microcosm for wisdom.

Phra Sumedho, who was then staying with him, is

the translator (S). Phra Sumedho is the senior among a group of Anglo-Saxon monks who practise under Ajahn Chah in his monastery, or with one of his trained disciples in any of the eight branch monasteries in the Ubon area. An American, he was once in the Peace Corps but by this time had been a monk for seven years, and had earned high respect among the foreign Buddhist monks. The foreign and Thai monks in such monasteries are usually young, strong-minded, and yet good-humoured, and stay there for at least one or two years.

Four years after this interview, in 1977, Phra Sumedho was sent by his teacher to England to teach Dhamma and to eventually start a meditation centre there.

## The Interview

With Ajahn Jan at Wat Pa Bung Kow-Luang, near Ubon, translated by Sumedho Bhikkhu

R.: What do you teach newcomers?

J.: When they come to practise, I give them the basic training in morality (*sīla*), to know evil and to stop

doing it. If they're laymen it's the five precepts, and if novices the ten precepts. Morality is mainly given to discipline your body and speech, to stop your being careless and thoughtless and deliberately evil. It is necessary to keep the five moral precepts as your standard: not to kill other beings, not to steal, not to be sexually unfaithful, not to lie, not to lose your consciousness with drugs and liquor. These precepts are the foundation for meditation on all levels.

From there, you should associate with wise and good people, and not get caught up and lost in bad company. To have the right profession, one in which you can be moral, and not lie or steal or cheat in it or do things that would hurt or exploit other beings. Then to develop generosity, to be charitable towards other people, to the poor, to give people things they need. When you're meditating, you'll see greed or anger or wrong views come up—it is necessary to challenge them, and do something about them. Not to dismiss them, or lie to yourself about it, or be easy on yourself. Then to develop patience in everything, when things are good or bad, without getting caught up in joy or sorrow.

S.: The advice of the Buddha to lay people is to develop virtue. Loving-kindness is to refrain from doing unkind things to others, like exploiting or torturing them. To feel compassion, which is not pity

or looking down on others: it is a higher form, and means “to know the nature of suffering within yourself, and that all beings share this suffering.” When you know that we’re all in the same boat, the compassion will come by itself. Also joy towards others’ success and happiness, instead of getting jealous or envious of people who are better or more fortunate than you. This is where I fail a lot: I have much compassion for those worse off than myself, but little joy for those better off (laughing). And equanimity— regarding yourself from this point of balance: if everything is going well, there’s no point in feeling joy for yourself, nor if they are going badly, in feeling sorry for yourself.

R.: Do you teach monks the same?

J.: For the monks, I use the 227 training rules of morality (*vinaya*) to develop mindfulness around. That will help them the most in any later lay life. Whereas tranquillity or calmness of mind comes on its own actually as you become morally pure, you have to practise meditation, and the calm will come when your mind is free from guilt. When a monk comes here and dislikes living by the rules set by this monastery, he finds it impossible to stay here, because his mind gets so caught up in negative feelings like resentment or hatred that he eventually has to leave. If you’re living and practising here, you should build

mindfulness around that, but if you're caught in criticism and dislike of the place, you're not being aware of the mind. Doctors have their rules, priests have their rules, and we monks have our rules. To bring the doctor's rules into a monastery would be stupid. Whatever thing you are called upon to do in life, that's what you should be mindful of, that's where your meditation lies.

R.: What part does the life-style here, the physical work, for instance, play in the meditation-goal? Or what part does the meditation play in the life-goal?

J.: In Buddhist monasteries in Thailand, they often speak of "entering" and "leaving" meditation. These strict methodical systems help some people a lot, but that is a narrow perspective, because they get the idea that it is something you enter and leave. Here, the idea is to make it your way of life, something which pervades everything you're doing all the time. So I stress less extreme forms of practice here, more naturalness, and natural mindfulness. With some methods, you walk very slowly and eat in very stylized exaggerated ways, but here you're supposed to eat and walk in a normal way, and to develop mindfulness around the normalness of your life as you live here as a monk. Mental training is not enough, so we work too. When the monks work and do chores, the idea is to become aware of whatever they're doing,



and not to get caught up in thinking, “I wish I were meditating in my hut now, really meditating, and not this carrying of water from the well,” thinking that carrying water from the well isn’t meditating. Your meditation does not lie in set stylized sitting positions alone in your hut, with all the conditions you think would be ideal for meditating. That’s meditation too, but it’s too limited. I want them to treat meditation so that no matter where they go, or what things come into their lives during their lifetimes, they will develop mindfulness around that part. We want to expand the mind and make it wider, because our mind is too narrow anyway, caught up in clinging and set views. To expand the mind, make it beyond limits, universal. To be in harmony and not in conflict with things as they are, with nature.

R.: What about mental meditation then?

J.: After you have the foundation in bodily and speech morality, I teach the meditation for your mind. It starts with *samatha*, pointing the mind on one thing rather than letting it wander around through all its cares and worries, problems and anxieties. We use the breath and a word to discipline the mind. After a while, when the mind gets “stuck” onto this one thing, the unpleasant thoughts and memories can’t get in. Here we use concentration on the inhaling and exhaling of the breathing, and a word *Bhu-to, Bhu*

while inhaling and *to* while exhaling. There's nothing sacred to this, it's only a way of concentrating the mind, but it is also a name for the Buddha or "the one who knows." I advise all my disciples here to keep this word going through their mind whatever they are doing, all day long, when working, eating, going *piṇḍapāt* (the morning walk for alms), washing their clothes, sitting meditating, chanting, and so on. This one word pervades everything they do, to stop all processes of thought and thought associations. This is the start of the mental training.

R.: Why do these monks chant?

S.: Chanting is a speech-meditation, a corporate meditation of a group of monks.

R.: Does insight follow this tranquillity-exercise?

J.: After the *samatha* the mind is not going around so rapidly. Tranquillity is stopping the mind, while insight is looking at it and examining it. This wisdom is not of worldly things, but is in knowing the nature of existence. You examine your own existence, whatever comes in and goes out of your mind, without judging as good or bad, but just watching their nature. And you see, not just intellectually know, that all that is born also dies.

R.: That all phenomena are impermanent.

J.: Yes, with Buddhism, concerning your feelings and emotions as well, you're always going through a process of birth and death. You may have a feeling of great love for someone, or indifference, or hatred, and then it disappears—this is emotional birth and death. But the very grossest forms of clinging are with the body, thinking that we are this body, and that we are born when it is, and die when it does. The very crude way of thinking, "I've been born and I'm going to die at such-and-such a time," is definitely identified with the body. And the clinging goes from this crude form of thinking to feelings.

Through understanding the idea of birth and death, you can understand the Buddha's doctrine that "there is no soul," there is nothing you can find through sensory perception that has a permanent entity like a soul. The consciousness too is always changing. You hear something through the ear or see through the eye, have a thought or taste or smell, jumping from one sensation to another. And you can only have one type of consciousness at a thought-moment. You can't be focused on one thing with your eye, and on a sound at the same time, you can only do it alternately.

R.: A lot of people say that but I'm not convinced. How do you know you can only do one thing at a time?

S.: You don't have to believe it, but just prove it yourself.

R.: O.K.

J.: To understand the nature of the physical body, we use certain techniques here and in the other monasteries of the north-east, like at Ajahn Chah's, my teacher's, and at Ajahn Mun's (his teacher's) disciples' monasteries. One is a traditional Buddhist meditation dating back to the first ordinations, which is still in the ordination ceremony when you become a monk. You examine the five objects of meditation of the head-hair, body-hair, teeth, skin, and nails, to understand their nature, to get insight into these very crude, coarse things about yourself.

We also contemplate the thirty-two parts of the body. Every night and every morning we chant the names of the thirty-two body-parts, just to understand that these parts are subject to birth, old age, and death. That they're all unclean, and there is nothing pure or permanent about them. In this type of meditation, you often dwell on the ugliness of the body. Of course the tendency in most people is to dwell on the beauty of the body, to try to identify themselves as attractive creatures, desirable to other people, and to seek to have others around them who are pleasant to look at, for their own vanity. This is a natural tendency for all

of us. So in Buddhism, we reverse, and dwell on the repulsiveness of the body as an antidote to the tendency to love the body and to think of it as lovable.

This is especially useful for young people with much sexual desire, which is aroused by focusing on the attractiveness and beauty of the body. We often use this type of meditation with young monks.

We see things according to the conventional way we have been trained to view them. Male and female, youth and old age, are conventional ways of viewing that are ingrained within our own minds and born out of ignorance. They are not absolute truths of existence, but are part of the flux and change of the universe. We see men and women through our sensory perception, which can only discriminate but not unify. Thinking in dualistic terms is a form of ignorance, not truth. If we identify with this body and think we are a male because this is a male body, then we are born and will die along with the body. If we cling to that role or convention which is impermanent, to that mental state, then we are subject to birth and death along with it. But if we free ourselves from convention and see things in their true nature, we are no longer subject to birth and death, as are the emotions and body.

(The interview is interrupted by hard rain outside, making talk impossible for about twenty minutes.)

R.: (resuming) What kind of results does this meditation bring?

J.: If a person has been meditating, his mind becomes stable and firm. If something very unpleasant happens in your life that would cause you anguish and pain, like if your wife dies, instead of getting lost in the emotions and wanting to kill yourself or blame others, your mind is really firm through everything. The average person who never meditates gets lost in his feelings. When his life is happy and pleasant and everything is pretty and nice, he'll feel wonderful. When things become unpleasant, then he starts crying and screaming, blaming everybody for how awful they are. But a meditator takes things as they come and his mind is stable under all circumstances, whether life is giving him the best or he's having to endure the worst pain or sickness or old age. We talk a lot about "letting go, not clinging," both here and at Ajahn Chah's and at Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's (another master in south Thailand). Becoming detached instead of attached. One of the key ideas is to do things with a mind that is empty, that is not attached to something else.

R.: How much of this is an ideal and how much is practice?

J.: A meditator can for instance suffer and endure

physical pains without whining or complaining about it or annoying other people. I've seen Ajahn Chah with malaria, and he kept pretty much to himself during that time, without bothering anyone, but whenever lay people or visitors came to talk with him, although he might be shaking in his hut with the fever, he would stop the shaking and go down and meet them. He has developed the will not to show any sign of physical discomfort in front of other people. Meditation prepares you to face sickness, old age, and death without fear or crying or seeking only the happy times, to be unmoved by them.

R.: Does that mean that you will not experience pleasure or happiness as much?

S.: We experience it, but don't get lost in it, nor do we seek it.

R.: You experience it as intensely, but don't become dependent on it?

S.: When beauty or happiness is there you know it; it seems like what it is, but it's not something that you feel miserable without. The happiness of a monk is peace rather than sensuality. As you can see, the life here is not exciting, the things you can appreciate sensually are very limited. You're supposed to be very disciplined about even your food. The real joy or bliss is from the mind becoming peaceful, not from feelings

of ecstasy or extreme happiness. In not fearing that you will lose this happiness, and in seeing things as they are and knowing their nature. There's no guarantee of what's going to happen to you physically in the future. You can be put in prison, or someone can cut off your legs, or you can be made a prince or king and live in an emerald palace. But if your mind is stable, you'll be able to be a king if you're called upon to do so, or to be a beggar—without, if you're a beggar, wishing you were a king, or vice versa.

R.: I'm curious, why have you got so many broken clocks and watches here on your porch and in the resting-building?

J.: They've been given by monks who have ordained and disrobed; the things they had as a monk they usually give to the monastery. They often don't take very good care of these things, so there are all these clocks that don't work. Some I can fix myself, and others I can't. I asked Sumedho Bhikkhu if he wanted one, but he said he was trying to practise without them, to develop mindfulness.

S.: I'm determined to set my mind to get up at the right time. Before I've been too lazy to do this, but now I don't have a clock and have to.

J.: The idea is to have discipline with all acts, even while sleeping. To sleep mindfully, Ajahn Chah would



put a bottle on one thigh and a glass on the other. Most people move around as they sleep. When he woke up, if these things had not moved at all, he had been peaceful, but if he had been restless they would have fallen.

Sometimes we sleep sitting, up. The thirteenth *tudong*-rule (semi-ascetic exercise) is the “sitter’s practice,” in which you voluntarily refrain from lying down while awake or asleep. We all do this on each Buddhist Sabbath.

S.: The abbot has earlier done ten days without lying down. And last year in the rains season, which is three months, he didn’t lie down, in order to develop mindfulness and energy. I did it for two weeks during the last rains, and it was really painful at first. You feel so tired all the time and are really in physical discomfort a lot. But then, after a few days, you get to a point of lightness and good feeling. And if you keep on with it you may feel very good. You sleep sitting up, resting mindfully. It isn’t good to do this all the time of course, but it’s a discipline to develop energy and will power, to get past all the points where you want to give up, past the chaos and fears and complaints of having to face discomfort and sleepiness.

J.: When you start on these difficult exercises, you

have to set a fixed period of time in which you definitely intend to keep the rule. Otherwise it's too easy to give up. You should not make it so long that you will get too discouraged, nor so short as to make it easy for yourself. At first you want to escape from this vow. In this way you test yourself, and then just watch what comes.

S.: I used to get easily angered if I didn't get enough sleep. After the Sabbath days, when we had to sit up all night and go out for food the next morning, everything irritated me and I'd feel hatred for everybody around me. Either the monks ahead of me on the alms route walked too slow or too fast; nobody did anything right. I just watched, and thought "this is terrible!" It was a habit I had developed that I'd complain and get cross when I got tired. So I was determined to cut off that defilement. So I went without sleep for long periods of time, and just watched. I saw the defilement that was there, and the exercise confronted and pushed it, so that every time it went away I'd bring it back, until finally it has no hold on me anymore. And now it's all gone, and I don't get angry. There are so many subtle attitudes we have about sleep and food, habitual conditioning.

R.: When the monks sit looking at their food in their bowl before they eat, what are they doing?

J.: Recollecting the nature of food. The first few months of meditation can be terribly painful for some, especially if they find a change of diet difficult. Hunger and cold too, all these unpleasant sensations, bring in so many negative thoughts and miserable states of mind. They make you feel alone. But the main idea in Buddhism is to understand suffering. And if you are willing to go through the misery and not give up, then you come out with good insight. Of course the misery should not be extreme to the point of ruining something, but it should be enough. Some monks find too easy a way of life they get in the rut of taking the most comfortable way, and never get any wisdom or insight.

S.: You probably noticed a foreign novice at Ajahn Chah's; he's only been there about four months and is adjusting to a new way of life. He has a tremendous amount of anxiety and doubt about what he's doing. You worry about it, I've been through it and we all have. You worry if there's maybe a better teacher elsewhere, if your health will degenerate, if the food has enough vitamins. One time I was at a monastery where the food was really bad. We'd just get really coarse bamboo shoots and greens, and repulsive things to eat like grasshoppers. The only thing that tasted good was some shredded papaya salad with vinegar and chillies in it. That I liked, so I ate a lot of it

with the rice. Then in the evenings I'd go through about four hours of excruciating stomach pain, just sitting there with my stomach. This went on for about two weeks, and I thought it was the food generally, but Ajahn Chah later told me it was the salad. I sat there and watched the world distorted through the pain in my stomach; it affected my whole view of the universe and since then I've been able to empathize with people with stomach trouble.

R.: These troubles maybe come with full-time practice in the jungle. I suppose that monks who practise and study the meditation texts in the city can avoid such problems

J.: Monks mainly approach Buddhism now from the scholastic side. They spend years learning Pali (Buddha's preaching language), the scriptures, the Abhidharma (Buddhist psychology), but they never learn the practical side of Buddhism. If you only study, you may become like some Abhidharma students who know the fancy words for all the different mental states you can possibly have—but if you don't know what your mind is, that doesn't help you at all. Although memorizing lists of things may be a mental exercise, it will not bring any wisdom into you. The main aim is to see things as they really are, to know good and evil as they are, without trying to seek one or avoid the other. You're not to cling to evil, but

also not to goodness, because they're both changing and depend on each other. A lot of monks who study for years and then come into meditation, spend their time looking for the things they've learned from books, rather than in seeing what is there in the present. It is hard for them to let go of all this knowledge which they spent so many years acquiring. They get a feeling in the Buddhist schools of doctrine, which go from class one to nine, that they are attaining a brilliant background in Buddhism. There are very few students on the ninth level, because it's difficult to get that high. But maybe most of those people have never even approached meditation. The authorities on Buddhism are the worst, because they know too much about it without knowing what it itself is; they have too many opinions. Often the people who meditate don't know anything about Buddhism! They don't have too many biases beforehand.

R.: Then the monks here don't have such conflicts of theory and practice?

J.: The monks' rules are for you to build up a foundation of discipline within yourself, rather than depending on someone else to discipline you. But often you'll see novices or monks looking around to see if anybody is watching, and if nobody is, they'll do something wrong. If somebody's watching, they'll do it right. That's not good.

Even if you're completely alone, you're to know the vows you've taken, what to do and what not to do, and to do it correctly without worrying about the opinions of others. But of course both the Thais and foreign monks do look at each other a lot, to see what the other person is going to do. If you're always concerned about how you appear in front of others, if you're willing to do something against your rule when alone, then you're not meditating right, or not trying to, and have not taken much from your meditation into your daily living.

R.: My last question is, what is the best way to teach children between eight and fifteen years old?

J.: With children you don't have to explain meanings so much because they often enjoy just the forms. We don't force them, but just lead them into developing their consciousness around doing things rightly, because they enjoy doing them. We make them aware of what is good, and what is evil, what they should do and what they shouldn't, and this knowing of what is good and bad makes them feel very secure. They learn how to respect, as in correctly bowing to the Buddha and in respecting the monks. You don't have to explain the reasons why so much, because they follow and copy you. I can have them sit in calmness-meditation, and develop their posture, and they'll enjoy doing it for its own sake. Because

they're just young children, they don't have the questioning or discriminating faculty so much yet. Thais often train their children by leading them through all the forms. They can do these things well, and enjoy following the adults. For instance it's good for a child to be conscious of his body and of how to use it rightly, to develop good posture, to learn to sit quietly without chattering and be peaceful, to respect his mother and father and adults. When they get older and start asking the questions, you can explain the reasons and start giving the answers.

S.: Not to let your children go to films where they see all kinds of violence and anger, because it affects them badly. But to take them to places like here, where there are teachings of loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. Where virtue is stressed over violence and cruelty. So that they can develop a consciousness of the virtuous side of life, while they are still children.

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